

Nottingham College

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Nottingham College was inspected in January 2020. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

Nottingham College is the only general further education college in the city of Nottingham. It offers a wide range of classroom-based courses for both adults and young people, and trains a large number of apprentices. In recent years, the college has experienced significant changes, having merged with Central College Nottingham in 2017, made several staffing changes at a senior level and, most recently, having moved into a new, purpose-built centre in the heart of the city. The visit focused on classroom-based courses, with learners having returned to face-to-face teaching following the ending of the pandemic restrictions. The visit took place during the first full week of teaching.

Themes

To what extent do teachers identify the specific skills and knowledge that learners need? Do teaching plans capture those skills and knowledge and are they to the right standard? Reasonable progress

Curriculum leaders understand the need to carefully consider the specific knowledge and skills that learners are likely to require for their next steps. They have begun work to shape the curriculum to better match these needs. However, the extent to which this work has influenced the content of current courses varies between subject areas. A few teachers have not yet fully understood the extent of their control over the precise details of the curriculum. Consequently, they do not look beyond qualification assessment requirements when planning teaching.

Most teachers organise courses in a clear and logical manner. They typically start with core concepts and help learners to develop a picture of how each knowledge component builds towards a coherent whole. They explain concepts clearly and in appropriate detail.

Teachers often use imaginative methods that help learners to understand and remember key information. For example, early years learners work productively in small groups to gain an appreciation of the size of a foetus at different stages of development, using fruit and vegetables to illustrate growth. Learners are then able to build on this by considering more specific features of embryonic development.

Teaching staff recognise the need to demand a high level of performance from their learners. Although written plans do not always convey these expectations, teachers themselves are clear about the standards that they expect learners to achieve. However, in a few cases, teachers place too much emphasis on developing learners' broader attributes and behaviours, such as professionalism and being respectful. Although these qualities are important, they occasionally distract teachers from the main subject focus of the course.

To what extent do teachers check learners' understanding in lessons and plan assessment activities throughout courses that help to strengthen learners' recall of topics?

Reasonable progress

Teachers have received training in the effective use of assessment, and in every classroom visit inspectors witnessed teachers using a variety of methods to check learners' understanding. For example, in biology, teachers used questions to recap and reinforce new learning about the construction of cells. They thoroughly tested learners' understanding through the use of gap-filling exercises, diagram labelling and online quizzes. However, a few teachers have yet to fully master the use of assessment in lessons and provide activities that are too easy, are ambiguous or do not relate well enough to the taught material.

Teachers now have sensible plans in place to assess and strengthen learners' recall and understanding of topics throughout their courses. Subject modules have scheduled assessment points, at which previously taught material is revisited. Many lessons begin with activities that teachers use to check that learners can remember material from earlier lessons. However, these activities are not systematically planned and, as a result, teachers cannot be sure that learners can remember material from all elements of their courses.

Teachers understand the purpose of feedback and the characteristics that are likely to make it effective. They are aware that it is important for feedback to be specific and to the point. They are very clear that the usefulness of feedback lies in learners acting upon it quickly. However, it is too early in the year to see how this manifests itself in practice.

How much progress have managers and staff made in developing a tutorial programme that contains an appropriate range of topics?

Insufficient progress

Managers are well aware of the expectations for developing learners' understanding of a wide range of themes related to life in modern Britain. They are conscious of the need to develop learners' understanding, for example, of sexual abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour and have trained staff so that they are conversant with a range of issues.

The tutorial programme is one of the main vehicles for introducing learners to a range of topics that are outside the scope of subject teaching. Although staff have planned the programme in outline for the whole year, they have not yet established the precise content. The outline programme focuses too much on ensuring that major topics, such as democracy, are included, without sufficient consideration of how to make them interesting and relevant to learners. The result is a potentially arid and joyless series of lessons.

Core tutorial lessons and teaching materials are developed centrally and shared across the college. All tutors teach the same core lessons, with minor variations. The lesson being taught to learners during the monitoring visit was not well planned. This lesson focused principally on online safety. It lacked coherence and activities were poorly conceived. Some of the tutors who taught this session were able to impose a degree of order on the lesson, but several were not.

As well as a core tutorial programme, each college faculty has scope to develop additional tutorial sessions to better meet the needs of their own learners. This seems to be a sensible idea, but it is too early to judge the impact.

A few tutorials over the last year focused on relevant and interesting current affairs topics. However, materials for these lessons approached their themes in a simplistic and uncritical way. This does not provide learners with enough knowledge or the opportunity to discuss differing viewpoints to reach their own conclusions.

To what extent do governors now focus their attention on the quality of education? **Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection, the governing body has recruited senior leaders from further education who have expertise in the quality of education. This allows governors to challenge leaders and managers more effectively.

Senior leaders' reports to governors have improved, with more focus on the quality of education. Leaders present more refined data and information. As a result, governors are better equipped to ask more relevant questions to help drive improvement.

Governors are clear about the priorities of college leaders. These include improving teachers' skills, stabilising the leadership team and retaining the learners that have been recruited. However, the current quality improvement plan is too detailed, with over 100 actions. This does not help leaders or governors to focus on key issues. Governors are aware of this and are supporting the leadership team to focus on a tighter set of actions for the future.

Governors actively participate in reviews of curriculum self-assessment reports and attend performance reviews of some underperforming curriculum areas. This aids their understanding of the quality of education at the college and enables them to support leaders more effectively.

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